Takfír, declaration of unbelief:
includes excerpts from *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*

**by / on behalf of the Universal House of Justice**

18 July 2001

1. Letter from Ron House to the Universal House of Justice

Date: Thu, 08 Feb 2001
To the Universal House of Justice.

Some current issues in the Bahá’í community are of concern to me, and I hoped that you might be able to shed some light on these and resolve the difficulties I am having.

My first concern is actions such as the expulsion of Ms. … from the enrolled list of believers, which step, I understand, was taken as a result of your explicit instruction to the …. NSA.

Although I am curious about your reasons for this, my questions are otherwise, and are motivated by a letter, which Mr Juan Cole states was written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl Gulpáygání in the late 1890s, concerning the Muḥammad ‘Alí faction of covenant breakers. I include an excerpt from an article written by Mr Cole, as background information:

The practice of *takfír* in Islam was the declaration that a Muslim (whether a convert or a born Muslim) had ceased being a Muslim and had departed into unbelief (had become a *káfir*) by virtue of some belief that he or she held or by virtue of corrupt behavior (*fisq*). Muslim jurisprudents or mujtahids occasionally gave rulings or fatwas that such and such a person had departed from Islam into unbelief, though the lack of centralization in most Muslim law and most times meant that this was sometimes an isolated opinion with little force. Baraghani issued a fatwa of *takfír* against Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá’í, for instance.

I believe that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was saying, in the letter to Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl, that no person asserting belief in Bahá’u’lláh and averring that he or she is a Bahá’í may be similarly treated in Bahá’í law. We do not have the custom of *takfír* [saying someone has by virtue of a personal belief departed from the Bahá’í faith into unbelief] or *tafsíq* [declaring someone no longer a Bahá’í for reasons of moral turpitude].

Given the Arabic words involved, I would translate the passage this way:

“O friends! In the Cause of God there [is] no ruling that someone has departed the Faith into unbelief or has become so morally corrupt as to cease to be a Bahá’í. Humiliation and condemnation of others is not permissible.”

[The Persian is: *Dar di:n Allah “takfi:r” wa “tafsi:q” nabudih wa ni:st; tazyi:f wa tahqi:r ja:’iz na; ba: kasi: muja:dalih na-nama:yi:d wa muna:za’ih nakuni:d* ]

Declaring a born Bahá’í or a convert to the faith to have departed from it into unbelief would be a form of takfír, which I understand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá here to disallow in Bahá’í juridical practice.

[Note: I have inserted the word “is” into Mr Cole’s translation at a point where it appears to have been omitted due to a typographical error.—R.H.]

My first three questions concern the above material as it concerns situations like that of Ms ….

1. Is the above-mentioned letter from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá genuine, as asserted by Mr Cole?

2. If it is genuine, then does it prohibit the kind of action that you took against Ms …?

3. If it is genuine but does not prohibit action of the kind you took against Ms …, then in what way is Mr Cole’s analysis or translation of the letter incorrect or inapplicable to such situations?

Please note that although I use Ms … case as an example, these questions do not refer specifically to it, but are general questions about the principles applying to any situation in which you declare a person to be not a Bahá’í. If your reply is that, by its nature, these things can only be decided on a case-by-case basis and not in accordance with principles and laws, then I draw your attention to the following statement, and I ask you whether it is genuine and correctly translated:

By its nature, human society needs rules and relationships. For without these ties, security and protection cannot be had, nor can security or prosperity. In their absence, the sacred honor of human beings is nowhere in evidence, and the beloved of hopes remains invisible. The country and the clime would never be populated, nor would cities and villages be arranged and embellished. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Treatise on Leadership” (tr. Juan R. I. Cole, www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/trans/vol2/absiyasi.htm))

My final questions concern religious involvement in government. In your 7 April 1999 letter to all NSAs, you wrote:

Similarly, Shoghi Effendi’s explanation of Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of the future Bahá’í World Commonwealth that will unite spiritual and civil authority is dismissed in favour of the assertion that the modern political concept of “separation of church and state” is somehow one that Bahá’u’lláh intended as a basic principle of the World Order He has founded.

I believe I understand this comment correctly as a statement by you that “church and state” should not be separate in this dispensation. However, the following excerpt from a letter of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has been posted to some Bahá’í email lists:

You asked about the wisdom of putting the House of Justice in charge of important ordinances. First of all, this divine cycle is solely spiritual, full of godly compassion, and is a matter of conscience. It has no connection at all to physical, governmental or worldly matters. In the same way, the Christian dispensation was purely spiritual. In the entire New Testament, the only laws are the prohibition on divorce and the allusion to the abrogation of the Sabbath. All the injunctions were spiritual and the ethics divine. Just as he said, “the son of man [sic] did not come to judge the world but to save the world.” [John 12:47]. Now, this most great cycle is also purely spiritual, the bestowal of eternal life. For the foundation stone of the religion of God is the betterment of morals, the improvement of character, and the sanctification of deeds. The goal of all this is that beings who are veiled might attain to the station of the beatific vision, and that defective, dark essences might be illumined. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, letter of circa 1899. Source: Majmu’ih-’i Makatib-i Hadrat-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (“Collected Letters of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”). Volume 59. Iran National Bahá’í Archives Private Printing: Tehran, 1978. Reprinted, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2000, pp. 275–280.)

Further, in the “Treatise on Leadership” mentioned and referenced above, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is quoted as saying:

The function of the religious leaders and the duties of the clerical jurisprudents are to attend to spiritual affairs and to promulgate divine attributes. Whenever the leaders of the manifest religion and the pillars of the mighty divine law have intervened in the world of political leadership, put forward their rulings and attempted to manage affairs, it has ever caused the unity of the believers in the one true God to be destroyed, and resulted in the dispersal of the faithful into factions. The flames of turmoil flared up, and the blaze of rebelliousness scorched the world. The country was plundered and pillaged, and the people became the prisoners and hostages of oppressors.

Were you to refer to history, you would find innumerable, and, indeed, infinite numbers of such occurrences, the cause of which in every instance was the interference of religious leaders in political affairs. These souls are the authorities in establishing the purport of divine laws, not with regard to their implementation. That is, whenever the government questions them about the exigencies of the revealed law and the reality of the divine ordinances affecting both general and specific issues, they must communicate the conclusions to which their jurisprudential reasoning has led them about the commands of God, and that which is in accord with the revealed law. Otherwise, what expertise do they have in political matters, the protection of the subjects, the managing of serious affairs, the welfare and prosperity of the country, the implementation of the civil regulations and secular laws of a realm, or foreign affairs and domestic policy?

Note that in the blessed verse quoted above as well as in the clear saying of the Prophet, the statement is absolute rather than conditional, with generalized purport rather than being limited to a specific case. As for the station of the Imams and of the near ones at the threshold of grandeur, it is that of spiritual honor and glory. Their right is to the authority of the All-Merciful, and their crown of glory is the dust of the divine path. Their gleaming scepter is the lights of the bounty of God. Their royal throne is the seat of hearts, and their exalted and great crown is in the kingdom of God. They are the monarchs of the world of spirit and heart, not that of water and clay. They are sovereigns of the realm of the placeless, not of the graveyards of the contingent world. No one can usurp or plunder this glorious station or this pre-existent grandeur.

Similarly, Bahá’u’lláh writes (*Gleanings* page 304):

… your Lord hath committed the world and the cities thereof to the care of the kings of the earth …. He hath refused to reserve for Himself any share whatever of this world’s dominion.

And also (*Gleanings* page 241):

The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. … That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men’s hearts ….

And again (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* pages 220-221):

O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth, and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain.

(Note that this passage is addressed by implication to the members of the Houses of Justice, for Bahá’u’lláh writes “It behoveth them to regard themselves as the trusted ones [i.e. “trustees”—RH] of the Merciful [i.e. God] among men …”.)

My questions regarding these passages are:

1. Are the unofficial translations excerpted above genuine and correctly translated?

2. If so, in the light of these passages, why is it unreasonable to infer that “separation of church and state” is somehow a principle that Bahá’u’lláh intended? It is clear that some of the passages here discuss the Islamic dispensation, but if ‘Abdu’l-Bahá intended Bahá’ís to act entirely contrary to the principles He states above, it is strange that He should end this tablet with a reference to this dispensation and to the future:

Divine friends, the divine law has an era of youth, and the wondrous Cause has a springtime. The new age is the beginning of a first development. This age is the chosen age of the one God. The horizons of the contingent world are illumined by the attributes of the luminary of the apex of mystical insight. The east and the west of the globe are perfumed by the breaths of holiness. The face of the new creation is fair and comely, and the temple of the wondrous Cause is vigorous and fresh in the highest degree. Hearken with the ears of wisdom to the divine counsel and advice, and show forth a miracle with true intentions, sincerity of character, good disposition, and good fortune. Thus might it be established in world society and the council of nations, that they are the shining candle of the world of humanity and the rose in the garden of the divine realm. Mere speech bears no fruit, and the sapling of vain hopes remains barren. Action is required. Potentially, all things have talent. All things are exquisite. Some are easy to acquire, others are difficult to attain. But what good is mere potentiality? Human beings must be in actuality the sign of the All-Merciful and the standard of the Lord. Peace be upon those who follow the guidance.”

I look forward to your reply and to any additional light you may be able to shed on these matters.

Thanking you, — Ron House

2. Response from the Universal House of Justice to Ron House

18 April 2001

Mr Ron House

Dear Bahá’í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 8 February 2001, and has asked us to provide the following response.

You have sought guidance on the matters which are causing you difficulties as a consequence of Internet postings which include excerpts from unpublished Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá translated by a non-Bahá’í. Believers should generally observe caution in placing reliance on such passages. Apart from questions of the accuracy of the translations, any extracts must be considered in the context of the Tablet in which they appear. A distorted representation of the Bahá’í Teachings can easily be conveyed, whether deliberately or inadvertently, by the selection of brief excerpts which are then used out of context.

The first issue you have raised concerns a brief excerpt from a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which, in the form presented on the Internet, conveys the impression that it is inappropriate for an administrative institution of the Faith, such as a National Spiritual Assembly or the Universal House of Justice, to make a pronouncement that an individual is no longer a member of the Bahá’í Faith.

This matter is readily clarified by studying an authorized translation of this excerpt in context with the passage which follows it.

*O ye beloved of the Lord! The Cause of God hath never had any place for denouncing others as infidel or profligate, nor hath it allowed anyone to humiliate or belittle another. Contend and wrangle not with any man, and seek ye not the abasement of any soul. Disparage not anyone’s name, and wish no harm upon anyone. Defile not your tongues with calumny, and engage ye not in backbiting. Lift not the veil from the doings of others, and so long as a person professeth to be steadfast, remonstrate not with him, nor expose him.*

*Let not these very words be a pretext for dispute and contention. Through your constancy and steadfastness destroy the edifice of vacillation, and by your faithful adherence and scrupulous observance, strengthen the foundations of the Cause of God. Leave the people of negligence unto themselves and refer them for judgement to the Lord of the Covenant and Testament*.

The three sentences at the beginning of this passage constitute the extract which was translated and posted on the Internet, in a form which has some significant differences from the authorized version.

It is clear that this passage refers to the prescribed conduct of individual believers in relation to each other, rather than to administrative institutions. It is similar to innumerable passages in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, including the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. However, the Spiritual Assemblies, as embryonic Houses of Justice, perform functions quite different from those of the individual, as is apparent from the following two passages from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian.

Love is the standard which must govern the conduct of one believer towards another. The administrative order does not change this, but unfortunately sometimes the friends confuse the two, and try to be a whole spiritual assembly,—with the discipline and justice and impartiality that body must show,—to each other, instead of being forgiving, loving and patient to each other as individuals. (*Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File*, Helen Hornby, rev. comp., 3 rev. ed. (Bahá’í Publishing Trust, New Delh, 1994), p. 403)

… There is a tendency to mix up the functions of the Administration and try to apply it in individual relationships, which is abortive, because the Assembly is a nascent House of Justice and is supposed to administer, according to the Teachings, the affairs of the community. But individuals toward each other are governed by love, unity, forgiveness and a sin-covering eye. Once the friends grasp this they will get along much better, but they keep playing Spiritual Assembly to each other and expect the Assembly to behave like an individual …. (idem, p. 77)

The duty of deciding whether a person satisfies the qualifications of a true believer has been assigned to the Spiritual Assemblies by the Guardian and is clearly stated in the constitutions of those Assemblies.

The second issue causing you concern is that of relating other excerpts from Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which have appeared on the Internet to the statement of the House of Justice that the future Bahá’í World Commonwealth will unite spiritual and civil authority. An authorized translation of the excerpt which is central to your concern is presented below, together with the succeeding passages.

Ye have asked concerning the wisdom of referring certain important laws to the House of Justice. Before all else, this divine cycle is purely heavenly and spiritual, and concerned with the matters of the soul. It hath but little connection to physical, temporal, or worldly matters. The Christian dispensation was in like manner solely spiritual. Thus, in the entire New Testament, there appeareth naught but the prohibition of divorce and the allusion to the abrogation of the Sabbath. Even as He saith, ‘the Son of man came not to judge the world but to save the world’. This most great cycle is likewise of purely spiritual character and is the bestower of life eternal. For the head cornerstone of the religion of God consisteth in refining the characters, reforming the manners, and improving the attributes of

men. The purpose is that beings that are veiled may see, and that dark and defective realities may become illumined.

All other ordinances are subservient to faith, certitude, confidence, and understanding. This blessed cycle being however the greatest of all divine cycles, it embraceth all spiritual and temporal matters, and is endowed with the utmost power and sovereignty. Therefore, those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice. The wisdom of this is that the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place. Therefore the House of Justice will take action accordingly.

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.

Say, O People: Verily the Supreme House of Justice is under the wings of your Lord, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, that is under His protection, His care, and His shelter; for He has commanded the firm believers to obey that blessed, sanctified, and all-subduing body, whose sovereignty is divinely ordained and of the Kingdom of Heaven and whose laws are inspired and spiritual.

Briefly, this is the wisdom of referring the laws of society to the House of Justice. In the religion of Islam, similarly, not every ordinance was explicitly revealed; nay not a tenth part of a tenth part was included in the Text; although all matters of major importance were specifically referred to, there were undoubtedly thousands of laws which were unspecified. These were devised by the divines of a later age according to the laws of Islamic jurisprudence, and individual divines made conflicting deductions from the original revealed ordinances. All these were enforced. Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá’í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.

The extract presented on the Internet is that translated and appearing as the first paragraph of this passage. It is clear that use of that portion of the passage alone, out of context, conveys a misleading impression which is immediately rectified by perusal of the entire passage. The statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that the Bahá’í Faith “embraceth all spiritual and temporal matters” is consonant with that of the House of Justice about the future Bahá’í World Commonwealth.

You have referred also to a number of extracts from *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*, in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the damaging effects of the interference of religious teachers in political affairs. The inapplicability of these passages to the future role of the democratically elected Houses of Justice is clarified by study of the Bahá’í Writings on the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. Authorized translations of these extracts are enclosed with this letter.

The House of Justice trusts that you will find these clarifications helpful, and it will offer its prayers in the Holy Shrines for your spiritual illumination.

 With loving Bahá’í greetings,

 Department of the Secretariat

**Enclosure**

3. Extracts from Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Human society is by nature in need of binding rules and relationships, for otherwise it would not experience peace and protection, nor enjoy happiness and security. Without them, the sacred glory of the human condition would not be unveiled and the desire of all hearts would remain unrealized. The country would not prosper, and its cities and villages would not find order and arrangement.*

*The duty of the doctors and divines is, however, to attend to the matters of the spirit and to promote the attributes of the All-Merciful. Whenever the leaders of God’s glorious Religion and the pillars of His mighty Law have intervened in political affairs, and designed schemes and devised plans, it hath inevitably shattered the unity of the believers and scattered the ranks of the faithful; the flame of sedition hath been kindled and the fire of hostility hath consumed the world; the country hath been pillaged and plundered; and the people have fallen into the hands of the mediocre.*

*Were ye to refer to history, ye would find countless similar instances, each and all due to the interference of religious leaders in political affairs. These souls are meant to issue the ordinances of God, not to enforce them. That is, whenever the government inquireth of them, in matters of greater or lesser consequence, concerning the exigencies of the law of God and the true purport of His ordinances, they should set forth that which hath been deduced from His laws and is consonant with His religion. Beyond this, what can they know of political matters, of the protection of the subjects, the management of important affairs, the welfare and prosperity of the nation, the administration of the laws and statutes of the realm, and of internal and external issues?*

*Observe that both this blessed verse and explicit tradition are absolute and universal in their purport, not conditional or confined to a specific case. As to the true leaders of religion and the favoured servants of the celestial Threshold, their rank and station is that of spiritual honour and majesty, and their prerogative the vicegerency of the All-Merciful Lord. Their crown of glory is the dust of the pathway of God, and their resplendent diadem the light of the bestowals of the Almighty. Their throne of justice is established upon the hearts, and their exalted and glorious honour is the seat of truth in the realm of the Kingdom. They are the monarchs of the realms of heart and soul, not of the world of water and clay, and the sovereign lords of the lands of the placeless, not of the narrow straits of this contingent world. And none can ever usurp or deny this sublime station and ancient glory.*

1. “Treatise on Politics” by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)